



Evolution and the Problem of Evil

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/harris-evolutionary-evil/>



I want to thank the organizers of the Dabar Conference for giving me the chance to contribute. I must admit I am feeling very much out of my league here—I am not a scientist, I am not a philosopher, I’m not even an OT scholar! I have asked myself more than once, how did an NT scholar end up here? So even as I begin, I also want to remind

For many years, I often wondered how an encounter with Jesus could change the Creation War. One such place we can move past the emptiness of theism to a Christ-centered confession is in the so-called “problem” of evolutionary evil, a type of theodicy.

One portion of the origins debate to be reordered is the conscription of “death and suffering” into an argument against evolution. Evolution tells us there is a great deal of death and suffering in the past, and this conflicts terribly with our human conceptions a loving and powerful God. This is a profound theological problem, it seems, to suggest that God would create us this way. An example of this sort of reasoning can be found in a recent paper by Kurt Wise. Others have given response to this in various ways, I have been working out a Christ-centered anti-theodicy of evolution, which I might finish someday. The obvious problem is that these arguments only considering death and suffering, while ignoring entirely life and joy. Setting aside that objection, at most this seems to unsettle a man-made sort of theism.

At most, these arguments would demonstrate that man-imaged theism and evolution are in conflict, however, they do not unsettle a Jesus-grounded faith. There is nothing in evolutionary evil more unsettling than this: that an all-powerful God would give His only Son over to suffering and death. I am no more disturbed by evolution than I am by this. That suffering might move us “from good to perfect” is not how we would make the world, but it is entirely coherent in light of the God we find by Jesus.

The NT theologian Dana Harris from TEDS challenged these notions of theodicy with a truthful encounter with Jesus. Just as this contribution does, I hope more engagement from NT scholars might bring us into deeper reflection on how Jesus might reorder all things, including our notions of theodicy.

everyone that charity is a Christian virtue and any application of that charity to my response is very much appreciated!

These reflections are response to the very difficult topic of evolutionary evil, and the difficulty of reconciling it with the clear affirmations of God’s goodness and the goodness of his creation.

I am proceeding cautiously, but I would like to explore two questions as a means of responding to the problem of evolutionary evil.

1. First, is all animal suffering and death necessarily evil? This seems to be the presupposition with the problem posed by evolutionary evil, but I think that aspects of this presupposition need to be challenged.
2. Second, and clearly related, could suffering and death be part of the move from “good” to “perfect”? Here I’d like to suggest some analogies drawn from some aspects of Jesus’s incarnation.

Is All Animal Suffering and Death Necessarily Evil?

I will work with the following definition of evolutionary evil. Evolutionary evil is the pain, suffering, and death inherent in the evolutionary process, especially the long ages of prehuman animal pain, suffering, and death. Thus evolutionary evil rests on the assumption that the process of natural selection must have involved millions of years of seemingly senseless suffering, death, and even extinction of a staggering number of species.

The question of evolutionary evil appears to strike at the heart of the biblical claim that both God and his creation are good because it assumes that all suffering and death are evil. At the same time, evolutionary evil appears to challenge the traditional theodicy that suffering and death did not exist before the fall of Adam and Eve, and are thus the result of sin. The issues here are complex and interrelated, so clearly I cannot address all of them. Instead I want to focus on the assumption that all suffering and death are necessarily evil. I think that this is what Peckham means, although he could mean that suffering and death are the result of evil, which would be a different issue.

I remind us of Peckham’s appeal to the lessons that Job learned and affirm the need for humility. When it comes to the prehuman realm, we are forced to speculate—neither Scripture nor the scientific data is unambiguous. In fact, the Bible does not address the question of prefall animal suffering and death directly. This is perhaps that reason that so many have assumed that animal suffering and death must be

a result of the fall, but I don't think that we can make that assumption.

In a helpful article on prefall animal death, Ingrid Faro notes that the question of "plant death" is not often addressed in the discussion of prefall animal death.¹ Clearly plants do not have living souls as animals do. Yet the fact that plants were given as food implies some type of prehuman, prefall death. So it is highly plausible that death itself is not absent from prefall creation, although I understand that the Hebrew verbs for dying are not applied to plants, so plant "death" may be irrelevant. Additionally, Psalm 104 seems to show fluidity between "prefall" and "postfall" aspects of God's creation such that prefall animal predation is certainly plausible. Faro also makes similar observations from Job. I would add that this also appears to be supported by examples of complex ecosystems in which the loss of predators (such as cougars) upsets balances that keep other animal populations in check and thus results in the loss of certain plant species. In other words, animal predation is part of these ecosystems, so I think it's plausible to conclude that animal death could have existed in the prefall world. Clearly flora and fauna are not the same, and I am not addressing the question whether animals have souls and/or are capable of real suffering at this point. I am simply mentioning there seems to be biblical warrant for understanding prehuman, prefall death that is not necessarily evil or the result of evil.

Also related to the question of whether all animal suffering and death are evil are questions of temporality and permanence. One of the aspects of evolutionary evil is the vast number of species that have become extinct during this process. Extinction, however, is a problem only if one assumes that every species was intended to be permanent. I'm *not* volunteering to be an extinct species, but I'm not sure that we can assume *a priori* that every species was intended to be permanent from its beginning. Instead, I think it is plausible that some species fulfilled their God-intended—indeed God-glorifying?—purposes during the time in which they existed. I want to make clear, however, that the possibly temporal nature of some species should in no way detract from or diminish our God-given responsibility to be stewards and guardians of God's creation. Although I cannot address the point here, I would have the same response if we were to determine definitely that animals are not capable of experiencing real suffering. I am indebted to Michael Murray's book, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* for some of my thinking here, assuming that I have not misunderstood or misrepresented him.²

Clearly the question of prefall animal death is much bigger than these brief comments, but the point that I want to raise here is that the assumption that animal death could not be part of God's good creation can be challenged. This seems implicit in God's question to Job (38:4): "Were you there when I laid the earth's foundation?"

Could Suffering and Death Be Part of the Move from "Good" to "Perfect"?

The second question that I'd like to pose is, could suffering and even death be part of the move from "good" to "perfect"? Here I'd like to draw upon some aspects of Jesus's incarnation.

My students often accuse me of claiming that all roads lead to the Epistle of Hebrews, which may be true . . .

Heb 5:7-9 states that

during the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. **Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered** and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

In these verses, suffering and perfection are clearly linked. Perfection in Hebrews is best understood teleologically—perfection is achieving God's intended goal for a person or process. I've been reminded of the limitations of the concept of perfection in philosophical discussions, so I'm asking for some grace as I use this term as it is understood as part of *τελειώω* word group, and especially as it is understood in Hebrews. Perhaps a better word might be "completion," but I use perfection since this is the way that this word group is most commonly translated in Hebrews.

It must be stressed, that the move from good to perfect in association with Jesus is not a move from imperfect (morally or otherwise) to perfect. Indeed the author of Hebrews has already established in Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus had been tempted in every way but did not sin. Perfection in Hebrews can be understood as the continuation along a trajectory that culminates in God's intended goal. Thus if Jesus is to be the perfect high priest, who can perfectly represent humans before God, then his participation in humanity was necessary and this participation necessarily involved suffering. For our purposes, I'd like to suggest that this is a move from "good" (Jesus at the beginning of his incarnation) to "perfection" (Jesus as the perfect high priest) and that this move involved suffering and death. I would further like to suggest the possibility of a parallel between the "good" of creation and the "perfection," or intended goal of that creation that involved prefall suffering and death. This would be along the lines of some who suggest that "good" in the creation accounts does not necessarily mean "perfect."

I want to be very clear about the parallel that I am suggesting. For our purposes, I am not talking about the end, or telos, that Jesus accomplished through his death and resurrection and the redemption, or to use the language of Hebrews 11:39-40, the "perfection" that his sacrifice achieved for believers. Instead, I'm focusing very narrowly on the necessity of suffering for the Son to learn obedience in the context of his being perfected, which is understood as achieving the goal of becoming the perfect high priest. This move from "good" to "perfect" necessitated suffering and I'm suggesting a parallel in the necessity of suffering and death for the move from "good" to "perfect" in prefall, prehuman creation.

I understand that there are many limitations and possible objections to this parallel. For one, Jesus's incarnation obviously occurred after the fall as God's means of reconciling the cosmic rupture that

1. Ingrid Faro, "The Question of Evil and Animal Death before the Fall," *Trinity Journal* (2015): 193-213.

2. Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

resulted from the fall. Yet clearly Jesus shows that suffering and death can be part of God's redemptive move from good to perfect, and that this move involves suffering and death. So what I'm trying to argue is that this move from good to perfect suggests a possible theological basis for understanding prefall animal suffering and death along some type of trajectory from good to perfection, or the completion of God's intended purposes, during creation.

Before I circle back to one other question that Peckham's paper raises, I also want to note that although his paper helpfully lays out the problems and critiques possible solutions, there is very little of his own constructive way forward. So I would welcome more on that.

A Final Comment on Flourishing

Toward the beginning of his paper, where he offers some key affirmations of the nature of God (e.g., omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent), as he sets up his overview of approaches to evolutionary evil, he asks: "why would an omnipotent God create through a process that involves so much pain and suffering?"

Clearly I don't have an easy answer to this. I simply don't know. I could mention if time permitted some approaches to skeptical theism that I find compelling.³ Clearly God could have and can do anything, including create a perfect world from the beginning. Yet it seems that some element of or participation in pain, suffering, and even death is part of the good way that a good God has ordered both creation and redemption—a point to which I will return. Along these lines then, it is not entirely clear why prefall animal suffering and death pose a different problem (or a greater problem) than do suffering and death in general.

But here I would also like to address some questions pertaining to "good" and "evil." It is often supposed that whatever is 'good' relative to creation is (at least) that which corresponds to God's intentions for the flourishing of creation and that which is 'evil' is that which does

3. E.g., Michael C. Rea, "Skeptical Theism and the 'Too Much Skepticism' Objection," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 483-506.

References

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodicy>

<http://jbtsonline.org/paleoevil-theodicy-and-models-of-earth-history-by-kurt-p-wise>

not. I agree, but I wonder if we are too quick to assume that we understand what God's intentions for the flourishing of creation are. Clearly it is not easy to see how suffering and death align with flourishing, but that does not mean that they cannot. Although I am not directly appealing to soul-making theodicies, it does seem plausible that risk, danger, and even suffering, could have been part of God's good intentions from the beginning. I do find it plausible that prefall animal death could have been one of the ways that the first humans learned about the reality of death and hence could have understood the implication of God's commands to them in the garden.

Moreover, it seems to me that we could ask the same question of "re-creation," or redemption. Why would an omnipotent God redeem through a process that involves so much pain and suffering? Again, God could have done anything but he chose to redeem through the Son's suffering, death, and resurrection, and also through the redemptive suffering that he often uses to redeem and sanctify those who turn toward him. The movement of both creation and the postfall reconciliation of all things in Christ is toward redemption and ultimate flourishing. This much is clear from Revelation 21-22. And here I would agree with those who envision a new creation teaming with innumerable species, marvelously unified in bring praise and glory and honor to their creation.

The possibility that suffering and death could align with God's good intentions for flourishing certainly goes against human perspectives but there is a certain mystery that I think is unavoidable here . . . respectfully, leaving all discussion of mystery-mongering aside! I don't want to hide behind inscrutability, so to speak. But clearly God's infinite perspective is far above our limited perspective. This brings us back to the need for humility and our admission, together with Job, that we were not there when God created the universe. To which, I want to say Amen!

Some parts of this response have been slightly modified to respect the confidentiality of all participants involved in the conference. Reproduced with permission from Dana Harris.

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